

## ICCR and Environmental Health Threats To Children

On September 11, 1996, Carol M. Browner released a report detailing the health threats faced by children from the environment. In commenting on the report, Administrator Browner stated:

"We've learned that children face significant, long-term and unique threats from environmental toxics. For the first time, this report looks comprehensively at the impact of environmental pollution on children, and we believe that we must take a comprehensive approach to providing children with stronger health protection."

The report, entitled Environmental Health Risks To Children was prompted by the wide array of children's health problems that can be brought on by environmental risks. Many of these risks correspond with core concerns of the Environmental Caucus and many of the organizations with which Caucus members regularly interact.

In response to Environmental Health Risks To Children, Administrator Browner explicitly identified several strategies which are contained in the "National Agenda To Protect Children's Health From Environmental Threats". This agenda is consistent with the priorities of the Environmental Caucus and are relevant to the ICCR process. The National Agenda recommends addressing children's **total exposure** to toxic chemicals, moving beyond chemical-by-chemical approaches of the past. In keeping with this approach, new policies should address cumulative, simultaneous exposures to toxins. The agenda recommends for EPA to identify and **expand research on children's unique susceptibility and exposure** to environmental pollutants. EPA's Offices and Programs are urged to **set standards to ensure they are protective of children**. The agenda recommends developing and expanding programs and approaches which **reduce the risk of exposure**, with new standards "... which reflect prevention of threats to children where possible."

Notably, Administrator Browner's emphasis on children's health is not in response to a statutory mandate to EPA, but rather reflects the culmination of years of research. Much of this research focuses on the unique vulnerability of children to environmental pollutants. Children are susceptible to environmental toxins both because of their behaviors and because of their age. Children's unique behavior - especially crawling on the ground and playing outside - exposes them to more pollutants. They are more at risk because their systems are still developing and because they consume more food and fluids, relative to body size, than adults do. Children may be particularly vulnerable to the developmental effects of newly identified dangers, such as the potential effects on endocrine systems from pesticides and

industrial chemicals.

Barry Johnson, Assistant Surgeon General and Assistant Administrator of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, provided this assessment of the conclusions of this research:

"Children are not small adults; they are more likely to be exposed because they play vigorously outdoors...and they often bring food into contaminated areas and contaminated hands into their mouths. They are shorter than adults, which means they get higher doses in proportion to their body weight. Their developing body systems can sustain permanent damage if toxic exposures occur during critical growth stages. Most importantly, children depend completely on adults for decisions about risk management and housing."

Several threats were specifically cited by Administrator Browner:

- \* lead poisoning, which affects as many as 1.7 million children age five and under;
- \* asthma, which is now the leading cause of hospital admissions for children and which was the cause of 118 percent more deaths among young people in 1993 than in 1980;
- \* proximity to hazardous waste sites, with ten million children under the age of 12 living within four miles of a hazardous waste site;
- \* direct contact with pollutants in water by swimming in rivers or lakes, and indirect contact by eating certain freshwater fish;
- \* exposure to pesticides and other hazardous substances in food;
- \* developmental risks from exposure to endocrine disrupting pesticides and industrial chemicals.

More recently, the draft report to congress on mercury indicates that 1.6 million American women and children are at risk from mercury poisoning. The rate of childhood cancer has been rising since the early 1970's; today, a newborn child faces a cancer risk of 1 in 600.

Resources about environmental threats to children are available, in part by acquiring the data which informed Environmental Health Risks To Children. The U.S. EPA contact person identified at the time of Administrator Browner's

announcement was Luke C. Hester, (202) 260-1383. Information about ATSDR's new Child Health Initiative is available by contacting Robert W. Amler, Chief Medical Officer, at 1600 Clifton Rd., Mailstop E28, Atlanta, Georgia 30333 (404) 639-0700. In addition, the first National Research Conference on Children's Environmental Health took place on February 21-23, 1997 in Washington, and addressed topics including childhood-based cancer causes, asthma and respiratory diseases, neurodevelopmental effects, endocrine and sexual disorders, and other epidemiological, clinic and basic research topics. The contact for this conference, and an independent source of information is Carol Harris, Children's Environmental Health Network, 5900 Hollis St., Suite E, Emeryville, CA 94608, 510-450-3818; fax 510-450-3773.